Book Review: Everyday Discourse and Common Sense: The Theory of Social Representations

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Book reviews

Wagner, Wolfgang and Nicky Hayes, *Everyday Discourse and Common Sense: The Theory of Social Representations*, (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). xxii + 450pp. ISBN 1403933049 £19.99 (paperback).
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In one of the earliest editions of this journal Rob Farr, now Emeritus Professor at the London School of Economics, drew the readers' attention to the theory of social representations, a social psychological theory that eminently suits this field of enquiry (Farr, 1993). This pointer got little response from interdisciplinary PUS researchers, to the effect that the 'wheel' is repeatedly reinvented. We PUS researchers ought to heed Kurt Lewin's admonition to researchers and practical people alike: 'Nothing is as practical as a good theory' (this saying is also attributed to Bohr and Einstein). In their book, Wagner and Hayes present an excellent summary statement of what the theory of social representation is, the research attitude it reflects, the tool kit it offers, and the range of research it has stimulated since its emergence in the early 1960s.

Based on an earlier summary in German by Wolfgang Wagner of Kepler University, Linz, Austria (Wagner, 1994), this book is comprehensively updated and the argument extended and clarified, with the support of Wagner's British colleague Nicky Hayes. Wagner, a geologist by training and Professor of Social Psychology by career, is a beacon in the global network of social representations research. 'Social representation' is a theory of common sense and everyday knowledge and discourse. It is part of a wider intellectual attitude that rehabilitates common sense, distinguishes it from science without strict boundary and hierarchy, and advises on how to study it without undue prejudice. It suspends the impetus to debunk as a matter of research attitude and method (Bauer and Gaskell, 1999).

The book has 11 chapters and comes with a foreword by Serge Moscovici (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris), to whom this theory is originally attributed. After the introduction, which positions 'social representations' between an Annales history of 'mentalities' and a post-modern 'anything goes' of all knowledge claims, chapters 2 and 3 set the scene by introducing various notions of everyday life, rationality, unified or bifurcated minds (PUS researchers will easily recognise the expert-lay distinction here), and semantic and pragmatic evaluation of knowledge. The result is: everyday thinking is pragmatic and only secondarily oriented towards semantic truth.

To the novice, the authors recommend starting with chapter 4, and that is very good advice. It is the key to the book, defining 'social representations', alluding to its roots in Durkheim's 'collective representations' (religion, language, myths, etc.), and to the tensions that arise from this for a psychology of mind: is thinking a 'lonely act of a miser', or a 'social activity', or both? Important and just as controversial will be the distinction between primary object-related and secondary theory-related representations. The former refers to 'objects of thought', of which we all have our own experiences and a ready cultural tradition, e.g. family, the body, history or crime. The latter refers to second-hand knowledge that is communicated by an epistemic authority, e.g. science tells us about the atomic structure of matter, the planetary system, or the double helix of DNA; none of these is accessible in our daily experience. In fact, social representation theory originates in curiosity about the everyday use of expert notions, the psychoanalysed 'human psyche', in the culturally segmented France of the 1950s. The issue is not whether psychoanalysis is 'scientific', but the social fact that pious Catholics saw in psychoanalysis a version of the 'confessional' but resisted the pansexual universe, while Communists resisted a 'bourgeois science'. This is not analysed as forms of 'cognitive deficiency' (as it might appear to an orthodox psychoanalyst), but as a process of anchoring and objectification in a context of inter-group relation. Indeed, social representation is contextual. Forty years before the 'science wars', 'iconoclash' or 'culture clash', the theory of social representations suspended the 'deficit concept' and offered nuts and bolts to investigate judiciously the structure and functions of knowledge-in-context, i.e. local and lay knowledge. The main theoretical impetus is the analysis of plural common senses, of the clash of traditions, and of the resulting 'cognitive polyphasia'. (The problem of how to be a Catholic or a Communist and interested in psychoanalytic psychology in

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the 1950s France finds its contemporary equivalent in assuming evolution and being a religious believer.)

Chapters 5 to 9 give an overview of empirical research illustrating conceptual issues such as icon and metaphor, structure and dynamics, core and periphery, discourse and action, anchoring and objectification. We learn about representations in different places in the world of the unconscious, health and illness, of sperm and ovum, of genetics and GM food, of business and work, of war and peace, of eating well and healthily, of Zen-Buddism outside Japan, of natural disasters, of intelligence, of therapy, of monogamy and the family and other topics.

Finally, chapters 10 and 11 voice concerns on the kind of explanation that is achieved with parallel levels of analysis. This makes very clear that a representation always has two 'ofs': of something (of an object) and of a social group (of a thinking collective). It is both semantic (of an object) and expressive-appealing (in subject-subject context). Finally, a methods chapter shows that almost the entire canon of social research methods (interview, documents, images, observation, surveys, statistics and experimentation) has its place in this paradigm. Its defining feature is not the method of data collection and analysis, but the *theoretical attitude*. Again, this is 'liberating music' in PUS research, where much polemic is over method (qualitative versus quantitative methods) while the real issue is theory: the appreciation of common sense. Some historical memory – and good theory is just that – might move the field forward. And this book, although not focussed on public understanding of science per se, can play a significant role. Wagner and Hayes should to be commended for doing a great job and eminent justice to a large amount of material, neatly ordered and presented. The text is highly recommended for readers of PUS, students and researchers alike; and it will make for an interesting discussion to compare it with two theoretical texts on the same matter that came too recently for the authors to engage with (Markova, 2003; Jovchelovitch, 2006).

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Mooney, Chris, *The Republican War on Science* (New York: Basic Books, 2005). 342pp. ISBN 0465046754 US$24.95 (hardback).
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For years, scholars of rhetoric claimed science was cultural. Wedging a foothold into a field traditionally understood as the philosophy of science, they now find themselves defending scientific positivism as they ponder many of the claims made by Mooney in his book. Mooney examines the science-related policies and activities during the two terms of the US Presidency of George W. Bush. With recent allegations from James Hansen at NASA that he had been muzzled by the Bush Administration regarding his policy remarks on global warming, this book has even greater relevance. Mooney reports scandalous behaviour by bureaucrats and he claims links to cabinet level and undersecretary appointments following the ideological point of view of their President. His allegations appear nearly unequivocal, but his arguments are often strained and tortured. In his defence, Mooney adds a strong voice to the controversies in contemporary American science and technology policy-making.

First of all, many of the events Chris Mooney reports are important. His recreation of the controversies associated with global warming science, embryonic stem cell research, and intelligent design curriculum are on point and more accurate than most.

Second, Mooney makes a strong case that modelling is under siege. Science about the future involves speculation. To reduce the range of speculation and avoid intrusion into the world of fiction, models are used, as in the case of climate change. Models are easily challenged. They are only as valid as their predictions are verified. However, there are no alternatives to models when forecasting? This circular justification